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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 001356

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FRENCH RESPONSE TO DEMARCHE ON DESIGNATING
HIZBALLAH AS A TERRORIST ORGANIZATION

REF: STATE 34900

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER-COUNSELOR JOSIAH ROSENBLATT, FOR REAS
ONS 1.4 B/D

1. (S) Summary: On March 1, poloffs delivered reftel demarche on designating Hizballah as a terrorist organization to Julien Deruffe and Yves Trotignon from the MFA's office of counter-terrorism and Remy Bouallegue, Lebanon/Syria desk officer. Poloff also informed Dominique Boche, President Chirac's technical advisor on the Middle East, of the demarche. Post will follow-up in the coming days at senior levels to emphasize the importance of reftel demarche to the USG. GUIDANCE REQUESTS AT PARA 4. End summary.

2. (S) Deruffe, Trotignon and Bouallegue took careful notes of the details of the demarche and complimented it as "well-reasoned" and "thorough." Furthermore, they said our demarche would be of great importance as the French government continued its inter-agency debate on the designation of Hizballah. Nevertheless, they responded with lengthy counter-arguments of their own. Trotignon said that French intelligence services remained unconvinced that Hizballah was a terrorist organization. As an example, he noted that the presence of Hizballah procurement agents in Europe did not convince France that Hizballah was a terrorist (and not a purely military) organization. In addition to this "technical" debate, Trotignon said there were numerous political reasons why France was hesitant to designate Hizballah. Bouallegue cited U.S.-French efforts in Lebanon through UNSCR 1559, and asked how designation of Hizballah (especially after the recent assassination of former PM Hariri) would stabilize an already enflamed region? The French preference, said Bouallegue, was to continue to focus on UNSCR 1559 and not to risk that resolution's legitimacy in Arab countries that were initially suspicious of it. When poloff cited Hizballah's efforts to destroy prospects for Israel-Palestinian peace -- the test of the transatlantic relationship, according to France -- Bouallegue responded by describing Lebanon as France's "first priority." He stressed the potential destabilizing impact of EU designation on Lebanese internal stability, especially the potential to push Lebanon's Shia community further in the pro-Syria camp. Bouallegue also argued that EU designation was inadvisable before the crucial Lebanese parliamentary elections in May.

3. (S) Trotignon said France also feared Israel would take designation of Hizballah as a green light to assassinate Hizballah leaders and deputies, citing Israeli strikes against Hamas leaders following EU designation in 2003. Trotignon commented that Israel had demarched the French on designating Hizballah, but had not given the GOF any judicial or investigative proof of Hizballah's terrorist activities. Instead, said Trotignon, Israel had focused on political statements, which had diluted the effectiveness of their demarche. Trotignon and Bouallegue both emphasized that the moment was "too delicate" in the Middle East to consider taking what they considered a rash step: supporting the designation of Hizballah as a terrorist organization. Poloff argued that Hizballah was a tremendously destabilizing force within the Middle East, and that Europeans should make an objective assessment regarding Hizballah as a terrorist organization.

4. (S) Although Trotignon said he was very pleased with the detail contained in the demarche, he asked who the French intelligence services should turn to if, upon analyzing the demarche's detail, they had additional questions. He also expressed interest in further information on Hizballah's involvement in recent terrorist attacks in Israel. Post requests guidance on how to respond to possible follow-up questions of an intelligence nature. In addition, Bouallegue's linking of UNSCR 1559 and Lebanon's internal situation with the debate on designating Hizballah is a frequent point raised by French officials and one we expect they will deploy at the upcoming EU Clearinghouse meeting. Post requests Department guidance on responding to this linkage, specifically to answer the French assertion that EU designation now would undercut our mutual efforts to push for 1559 implementation.

5. (S) Comment: Although the MFA officials said French intelligence agencies remained unconvinced that Hizballah was a terrorist organization, political counter-arguments that focused primarily on the danger to Middle East stability of

designating Hizballah were clearly the most important to Deruffe, Trotignon and Bouallegue. This tracks with previous conversations the Embassy has had with the GOF, and demonstrates the difficult road ahead to convince France to designate Hizballah. The French appear paralyzed by their analysis that designating Hizballah has no chance of a positive outcome and that such an action can only lead to instability and crisis. End comment.
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